

Teens Acting Against Violence (TAAV) and the 40 Developmental Assets

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Teens Acting Against Violence (TAAV) is a student-led anti-violence education group that was formed in 1996 by Tundra Women's Coalition (TWC) in Bethel, Alaska, with an original grant from the Alaska Division of Juvenile Justice (DJJ). Bethel is a remote city in rural Alaska, accessible only by air or boat, with a population in 2015 of 6,080 people. Over half of the population (65%) is American Indian or Alaska Native, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

TWC and TAAV partnered with the University of Alaska Anchorage (UAA) Justice Center in 2013 to conduct an evaluation of the TAAV program through a one-time survey of former and current adult TAAV members (over 18 years of age). Overall, data from the evaluation showed that TAAV was a positive experience for the majority of the current and former TAAV members. TAAV also had a positive impact on developing life skills necessary for healthy relationships and lives.

This article looks at the program in light of the 40 developmental assets defined by the Search Institute, a nonprofit research program whose framework of strengths and supports for youth development has become an international benchmark. The developmental assets were not intentionally incorporated in the design of the TAAV program, but are reflected in its outcomes.

TAAV Background

The initial goals of the TAAV program were to recruit youth who were already peer leaders and have them promote messages aimed at reducing teen dating violence and promoting healthy relationships to their peers. This was accomplished through skits performed for peer education, public service announcements, and video/commercial spots. As TWC grew, experience with the needs of youth increased. In addition, gaps in services to youth became more apparent. This led to the development of TAAV's key strategies of working with youth. These key strategies include leadership development, work experience, skill building, healthy activities, teen empowerment, cultural relevance, outdoor education, peer education, crisis and family work, and community awareness. Over time, TAAV naturally evolved to include any teen who voluntarily selected to be part of the group. It is no longer a group

of youth leaders specifically identified and recruited by TWC staff.

Currently, TAAV is primarily member-driven, open to any youth in middle and high school. TAAV has a yearly membership of approximately 60 to 100 youth participating in education and outreach activities. Although the program is open to all youth, program administrators report that nearly all participants are Alaska Native youth. The central focus of TAAV is for youth to engage in community and regional outreach activities meant to discourage interpersonal violence and to promote healthy relationships, healthy choices, and healthy lifestyles. Outreach efforts reach up to 1,000 Alaska youth annually.

TAAV Survey Goals

The survey was distributed online to 86 former or current TAAV members over the age of 18 years as a convenience sample of potential respondents. These individuals were identified by TAAV staffers (several of whom were TAAV alumni) as having been *regular attendees*. The majority of TAAV members identified for this evaluation were alumni, rather than current program members. TAAV staff used Facebook and email to invite these 86 individuals to complete the survey. Eighty-five members of the sample participated in the survey, for an overall response rate of 98.8 percent.

Pursuant to TAAV objectives, the focus of the evaluation was placed on examining efforts in the areas of domestic violence and sexual assault prevention, building healthy relationships, encouraging sobriety, and suicide prevention. This evaluation was two-pronged, focusing on the program effectiveness and the benefits experienced by participants up to 10 years post-participation.

Essential Elements of Positive Youth Development

According to the Search Institute, there are 40 assets that lay the groundwork for positive youth development and transition from adolescence to adulthood. These 40 assets are grouped into four external assets (support, empowerment, boundaries and expectations, and constructive use of time) and four internal assets (commitment to learning, positive values, social competencies, and positive identity). (See The Search Institute's 40 De-

velopment Assets, pages 9 and 10.) Research by the Search Institute has shown that having a greater number of these developmental assets—essentially “building blocks of healthy development”—reduces a young person's tendency toward alcohol use, tobacco use, illicit drug use, antisocial behavior, violence, school failure, sexual activity, attempted suicide, and gambling. Beyond simple prevention, developmental assets have also been shown to help youth “thrive”—to overcome adversity, delay gratification, succeed in school, value diversity, help others, demonstrate leadership, and be physically healthy. This particular list of assets is intended for adolescents between the ages of 12 and 18—the key demographic served by TAAV.

In our original survey, respondents were asked a series of questions about their experiences in TAAV. By matching the questions and responses to the developmental assets list, we can gauge how well TAAV assisted youth in achieving a foundation for success.

External Assets

Support

The support asset includes family support, positive family communication, other adult relationships, caring neighborhood, caring school climate, and parent involvement in schooling. The TAAV program provides young people with staff who offer support and guidance to TAAV participants. This is evidenced by the very favorable opinions about the TAAV staff as reported by TAAV participants—97 percent felt that staff really cared about them and 91 percent felt that TAAV staff members were available to help solve problems. Additional results showed that 96 percent of respondents reported satisfaction with the job performance of TAAV staff—particularly how staff facilitated a positive experience within the group. Ninety-eight percent of TAAV members felt that TAAV staff were a good support system, providing a trustworthy adult to offer advice or assistance with questions or problems—someone that youth could turn to for help or guidance in times of stress. Overall, TAAV effectively provides its participants with support from nonparent adults.

Empowerment

The asset of empowerment includes factors such as a community that values youth, youth being recognized as resources, youth providing service to others, and youth feeling safe. The TAAV program empowers each TAAV participant. TAAV staff encourage TAAV members to participate in many different types of activities within their community and neighboring villages. Through outreach

References

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- Search Institute. (1997, 2007). “40 Developmental Assets for Adolescents “ (web page). Minneapolis, MN: Search Institute. (<http://www.search-institute.org/content/40-developmental-assets-adolescents-ages-12-18>).

Table 1. The Search Institute's 40 Developmental Assets: External Assets**Support**

1. Family support — Family life provides high levels of love and support.
2. Positive family communication — Young person and her or his parent(s) communicate positively, and young person is willing to seek parent(s) advice and counsel.
3. Other adult relationships — Young person receives support from three or more nonparent adults.
4. Caring neighborhood — Young person experiences caring neighbors.
5. Caring school climate — School provides a caring, encouraging environment.
6. Parent involvement in schooling — Parent(s) are actively involved in helping young person succeed in school.

Empowerment

7. Community values youth — Young person perceives that adults in the community value youth.
8. Youth as resources — Young people are given useful roles in the community.
9. Service to others — Young person serves in the community one hour or more per week.
10. Safety — Young person feels safe at home, school, and in the neighborhood.

Boundaries and Expectations

11. Family boundaries — Family has clear rules and consequences, and monitors the young person's whereabouts.
12. School boundaries — School provides clear rules and consequences.
13. Neighborhood boundaries — Neighbors take responsibility for monitoring young people's behavior.
14. Adult role models — Parent(s) and other adults model positive, responsible behavior.
15. Positive peer influence — Young person's best friends model responsible behavior.
16. High expectations — Both parent(s) and teachers encourage the young person to do well.

Constructive Use of Time

17. Creative activities — Young person spends three or more hours per week in lessons or practice in music, theater, or other arts.
18. Youth programs — Young person spends three or more hours per week in sports, clubs, or organizations at school and/or in community organizations.
19. Religious community — Young person spends one or more hours per week in activities in religious institution.
20. Time at home — Young person is out with friends "with nothing special to do," two or fewer nights.

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and education programs, TAAV members are given a positive role in the community and provide a service to others. Overall, 90 percent of respondents reported that they felt people look to them for guidance and that they are valuable members of their community—97 percent felt that they are role models to some extent in their community. Further, 97 percent of respondents reported that they felt safe in the program. Almost 96 percent of respondents reported that TAAV staff provided leadership opportunities to TAAV participants by giving them chances to lead the group, help make decisions for the group, help solve problems, and share their ideas with the group. These survey results suggest that the TAAV program successfully instills a sense of empowerment in TAAV members.

Boundaries and Expectations

The asset of boundaries and expectations includes factors such as family boundaries, school boundaries, neighborhood boundaries, adult role models, positive peer influence, and high expectations. The TAAV program helped create healthy boundaries and expectations for TAAV participants. As evidenced by survey responses, the TAAV program provided TAAV staff who were positive and responsible adult role models. Ninety-six percent of respondents approved of TAAV staff job performance, which included setting clear goals and expectations for the group, making good decisions, and communicating clearly. Ninety-eight percent

of TAAV members felt that TAAV staff were conscientious and kind—modeling positive, responsible behavior by making decisions in the best interest of the group; treating others fairly and with respect; and respecting different cultures and backgrounds.

Ninety-seven percent of respondents made new friends in the TAAV program and developed relationships which fostered peer reinforcement of the responsible behaviors and lessons taught in TAAV programs. Respondents overwhelmingly agreed (93.6%) that their peers were engaged and respectful of each other and the program—modeling responsible behavior. These survey results suggest that the TAAV program is successful in helping TAAV members respect boundaries and meet expectations.

Constructive Use of Time

The asset of constructive use of time includes factors such as participating in creative activities, youth programs, and religious activities, as well as spending time at home. The TAAV program offers many activities which serve as constructive uses of time. At least one-third of respondents reported participating at least once in one of the following favorite seven activities: attending TAAV meetings (62.4%), participating in fundraising activities (62.4%), assisting with TWC events (52.9%), traveling on an Outward Bound trip (50.6%), performing in skits (48.2%), traveling to neighboring villages (47.1%), and giving com-

munity presentations (37.6%). Over 94 percent of respondents reported that they enjoyed participating in fundraising events because it made them feel good to be part of a group effort—nearly 73 percent felt proud to contribute to a common goal. Further, 86 percent of TAAV respondents agreed that the TAAV program provided culturally appropriate activities that were both relevant and important to the mostly Yup'ik members. These survey results suggest that TAAV is successful at channeling group energies into constructive uses of time.

Internal Assets*Commitment to Learning*

The asset of commitment to learning includes factors such as achievement motivation, school engagement, homework completion, bonding to school, and reading for pleasure. The TAAV program includes educational components directly related to reducing teen violence and promoting healthy relationships. Respondents reported that they had increased their knowledge about domestic violence (81.8%), healthy relationships (77.3%), and sexual assault/abuse (71.2%) as a result of participating in TAAV activities. Additionally, more than 60 percent of respondents reported increases in listening skills and ways to relate to peers, and knowledge about suicide prevention and substance abuse.

Positive Values

The asset of positive values includes caring, equality and social justice, integrity, honesty, responsibility, and restraint. The TAAV program instills positive values in TAAV participants. As a central tenet of the TAAV program, TAAV members develop new skills in order to perform tasks that help others. Eighty-eight percent of TAAV respondents reported that their experience at TAAV taught them that they could make a difference in their own community.

The TAAV program actively engages in education stressing the importance of equality and social justice, as well as personal integrity, honesty, and responsibility. Eighty-seven percent of respondents said that the TAAV program resulted in changes to the way they live their lives. Specifically, 97 percent of TAAV members reported gains in knowledge about avoiding and ending unhealthy relationships and making healthy life choices. Further, 94 percent of respondents reported a high likelihood of intervening in a situation where they see that someone is at risk of harm. Eighty percent of respondents reported that they are more likely to speak out publicly on issues related to interpersonal violence.

From 98 to 100 percent of respondents reported that they had not used prescription medications, over-the-counter medications, inhalants or other household items, or methamphetamines, LSD, cocaine, or heroin, to

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get high in the month preceding the survey. Seventy-two percent of respondents reported that they had not used marijuana, and 41 percent of the adult respondents (over 18 years of age) reported they had not drunk alcohol or homebrew in the month prior to taking the TAAV survey. (All respondents were over 18 years of age at the time of the survey.)

TAAV effectively teaches positive values to TAAV participants.

Special Competencies

The asset of special competencies includes planning and decision-making, interpersonal competence, cultural competence, resistance skills, and peaceful conflict resolution. The TAAV program provided opportunities for participants to develop special competencies. Nearly 90 percent of respondents reported that their time in TAAV changed their decision-making process, and the decisions that they make.

Ninety-seven percent of respondents reported that TAAV had a positive impact on their interpersonal skills. Additionally, respondents reported that following traditional Alaska Native culture (91.8%) and traditional Christian beliefs (87.8%) was important for developing their personal values and beliefs.

The TAAV program emphasizes the importance of self-protective behaviors and resistance to peer pressure in all areas of life. Ninety-two percent of respondents reported that TAAV had a positive impact on their healthy self-care skills. Ninety-five percent of respondents reported that their participation in TAAV resulted in improvement in their resistance to peer pressure. Eighty-eight percent of respondents reported that TAAV had a positive impact on their abilities to deal with adversity, and that they had not been in a fight in the year preceding the survey. TAAV clearly addresses the special competencies asset.

Positive Identity

The asset of positive identity includes personal power, self-esteem, sense of purpose, and positive view of personal future. The TAAV program successfully taught positive identity

Figure 1. TAAV Word Cloud



Table 2. The Search Institute's 40 Developmental Assets: Internal Assets

Commitment to Learning

1. Achievement motivation — Young person is motivated to do well in school.
2. School engagement — Young person is actively engaged in learning.
3. Homework — Young person reports doing at least one hour of homework every school day.
4. Bonding to school — Young person cares about his or her school.
5. Reading for pleasure — Young person reads for pleasure three or more hours per week.

Positive Values

6. Caring — Young person places high values on helping other people.
7. Equality and social justice — Young person places high value on promoting equality and reducing hunger and poverty.
8. Integrity — Young person acts on convictions and stands up for his or her beliefs.
9. Honesty — Young person “tells the truth even when it is not easy.”
10. Responsibility — Young person accepts and takes personal responsibility.
11. Restraint — Young person believes it is important not to be sexually active or to use alcohol or drugs.

Special Competencies

12. Planning and decision-making — Young person knows how to plan ahead and make choices.
13. Interpersonal competence — Young person has empathy, sensitivity, and friendship skills.
14. Cultural competence — Young person has knowledge of and comfort with people of different cultural/racial/ethnic backgrounds.
15. Resistance skills — Young person can resist negative peer pressure and dangerous situations.
16. Peaceful conflict resolution — Young person seeks to resolve conflict nonviolently.

Positive Identity

17. Personal power — Young person feels he or she has control over “things that happen to me.”
18. Self-esteem — Young person reports having high self-esteem.
19. Sense of purpose — Young person reports that “my life has a purpose.”
20. Positive view of personal future — Young person is optimistic about her or his personal future.

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to TAAV participants. Nearly 94 percent of respondents reported that they had a sense of individual value and healthy self-esteem. Respondents reported that they would use their TAAV experience mostly to help share knowledge (38.6%) and help those in need (34.1%). TAAV clearly addresses developing a positive identity in TAAV participants.

Conclusion

While the TAAV program did not intentionally set out to include the Search Institute's Developmental Assets in its curriculum, it successfully addresses all of them, at least in part. The TAAV program provides a solid foundation for its members to embark upon successful and healthy lives. Perhaps what is most significant in relation to the goals of the program is that the vast majority of respondents said that their behavior has changed and their choices have changed. It is likely that these changes were partially a result of respondents feeling that they belonged, that

they were a valuable part of their community, and that there were staff members available to help resolve problems.

Overall, TAAV participants reported positive outcomes and lasting impacts from their time at TAAV. Figure 1 represents the most common key words used by respondents describing their TAAV experiences. Based on the overall positive feedback from former and current adult TAAV members, the authors of the TAAV program evaluation report are comfortable stating that TAAV has served an important role in the lives of many Bethel teens. Further, assuming that TAAV continues to evolve and focus on serving the needs of Bethel youth, TAAV is poised to remain a model for prevention, intervention, and education of middle and high school students in Alaska, if not the country.

Khristy Parker is a Research Professional with the Alaska Justice Statistical Analysis Center.

New Staff

Jo Walker has joined the staff of the Justice Center as Academic Program Specialist. Ms. Walker has many years of experience working in the legal field as a legal assistant. In addition, she was on the staff of UAA Facilities and Maintenance and the UAA College of Education. She was also the executive assistant to the general manager of the Alaska Airlines Center during the Center's opening and first 1.5 years of operation.

Tristian Monterastelli, MPP, recently joined the Alaska Justice Information Center (AJiC) staff as a Research Professional. Ms. Monterastelli received her Masters in Public Policy, with specializations in Economics and State & Local Policy, from Pepperdine University in Malibu, California. She is a UAF alumna and formerly worked at the Alaska Division of Juvenile Justice Fairbanks Youth Facility as a Juvenile Justice Officer.